

"So, what are you gonna do?"



The night was heavy, the air thick with smoke and ash. Flickering emergency lights painted the shattered streets in red and blue hues, and distant voices of firefighters and paramedics filled the silence between us. The aftermath of August 13th felt surreal, like stepping into a nightmare that wouldn't end.

Ahnaf turned back to me, his face shadowed and unreadable. "Honestly? I've got no idea," he said, shrugging. "A few things I need to figure out, some questions I need to ask... but I'm just as lost as you are."

I stuffed my hands into my jacket pockets, looking down at the cracked pavement. "It'll be okay. Don't stress too much about it."

He laughed softly, shaking his head. "Yeah, sure, I'll be fine. But what about you? Your parents still think you're off at some fancy government program. You really think they're buying that?"

The way he said it made my stomach churn. "What else am I supposed to tell them?"

Ahnaf stopped walking and gave me a look, part disbelief, part frustration. "I don't know... the truth, maybe? I mean, what's the point of hiding it from them? You think it's protecting them or something?"

"It's not that simple," I muttered, kicking at a loose piece of debris.

He tilted his head. "Why not? You really think they'd go around telling the world their kid's a superhero? Come on, man. That's not how parents work. They'd probably be more pissed if they found out you've been lying to them this whole time."

"You don't get it," I shot back, my voice rising slightly. "If people find out who I am—who we are—they'll come after them. I can't let that happen."

Ahnaf folded his arms and raised an eyebrow. "You've been watching too many superhero movies, dude. Real life doesn't work like that. Nobody's coming after your parents unless you plaster their address on a billboard."

I ran a hand through my hair, feeling the weight of it all press down on me. "Yeah, but what if they don't understand? What if they get mad? What if—"

"What if, what if, what if," he interrupted, throwing his hands in the air. "You could 'what if' yourself into a coma, Eric. They're your parents. They've probably already figured out something's going on. The only reason they haven't said anything is because they're waiting for you to come clean."

"I don't know..." I mumbled, staring at the distant chaos. "What if they're disappointed? Or worse, scared of me?"

Ahnaf softened a bit, his voice losing some of its edge. "Disappointed? Scared? Dude, they raised you. They've seen you at your worst—remember

that time you puked on your dad's shoes after eating all that carnival junk food?"

I couldn't help but laugh, despite myself. "That was different."

"Not really," he countered with a grin. "You're still the same guy to them, powers or no powers. Trust me, the only thing that's gonna scare them is the fact you've been dealing with all this alone."

I nodded slowly, his words starting to sink in. "You really think they'd be okay with it?"

Ahnaf smirked, clapping me on the shoulder. "I think they'd surprise you. Parents are weird like that. They can handle way more than we give them credit for."

I sighed, the weight in my chest easing just a little. "Maybe you're right. I'll think about it."

"Good." He looked back at the ruined cityscape, his face hardening again. "Now, stop worrying about that for a second and focus on what's in front of us."



I smirked faintly. "Heh... you're always the smartmouth."

He shot me a glance but didn't say anything. Beneath that composed exterior, I could sense him cracking. He had always been the steady one, the one who could shrug off pain, keep moving forward no matter what. But tonight... there was something different.

For the first time in his life, I saw fear in his eyes. Real fear. The kind he never had, not even when we were kids, and he stood up to the biggest

bullies in school without flinching. Seeing it now sent a cold chill down my spine.

I shifted my gaze to the ruined city in front of us, the streets littered with debris, buildings reduced to skeletons, and emergency lights casting eerie shadows in the dark.

"Ahnaf..." I hesitated, then forced the words out. "I'm sorry, bud."

He frowned slightly, his voice measured. "What for?"

"For not being there for you... when you fought Khan."

Ahnaf scoffed, waving it off like it didn't matter. "That's fine. You couldn't do anything anyway."

The casual dismissal stung more than I expected. I shook my head. "... I tried my best back at the hospital, but nothing worked on Khan. Nothing."

For a moment, Ahnaf said nothing, his jaw tightening. Then he sighed, his voice quieter. "Yeah... me too." He paused, his tone sharpening slightly. "Even Sentinel."

That name hung between us like a curse.

His expression shifted, his eyes narrowing. "Even Sentinel couldn't stop him. That piece of—" He cut himself off, his tone growing darker. "Do you know what he said to me? When I was kneeling there in the dust, after trying everything and failing?"

I shook my head, swallowing hard. "What?"

Ahnaf's voice dropped, low and venomous. "He said, 'A real superhero like me will always be stronger than things like you.'" He spat the words like poison. "Like we're just some knockoff version of what he is. Like we're not even human."

The weight of his words hit me like a brick. "Yeah..." I muttered, my voice barely audible. "I still can't believe it. That's the Sentinel we idolized as kids? That's the guy we looked up to?"

Ahnaf let out a bitter laugh, shaking his head. "Heh. Everything we knew was a lie, wasn't it?"

I could feel the shift in him now, the anger rising beneath his calm exterior. His voice hardened, edged with frustration and bitterness. "We thought he was this perfect hero, this symbol of everything we were supposed to be. Turns out, he's just another self-righteous asshole who thinks he's better than everyone else."

"Ahnaf—" I started, but he wasn't done.

"You know what pisses me off the most?" He turned to me, his eyes blazing now. "It's not just what he said. It's the fact that he believes it. He looks at us like we're garbage, like we don't even belong in the same league as him. And the world eats it up. They don't care about what we did to stop Khan. They don't care about the city we tried to save. All they see is the guy with the cape calling us junkies on TV."



The bitterness in his voice gave way to something rawer—frustration, anger, pain. He ran a hand through his hair, his fingers trembling slightly. "We risk everything for these people, and for what? To be treated like trash by the guy who's supposed to be the 'real hero'? To clean up his mess after he failed to stop Khan? It's bullshit, Eric. All of it."

I didn't know what to say. For once, the words wouldn't come.

Ahnaf turned away, his shoulders tense, his voice softer but no less bitter. "Everything we thought we knew... it's all a joke. The hero we wanted to be doesn't exist. And maybe he never did."

The silence that followed was heavy, the only sound the distant wail of sirens and the crackling of small fires in the rubble around us.

Finally, I found my voice, though it came out weak. "I'm sorry."

Ahnaf let out a hollow laugh, shaking his head. "Don't apologize. It's not your fault. It's just... the way things are, I guess."

He didn't look at me, his gaze fixed on the ruined city ahead. And for the first time, I wondered if he was right—if the world we believed in was gone, and we were just too stubborn to let go.

The silence of the ruined city was broken by the sudden screech of tires. A sleek black car slid to a stop in front of us, the abrupt motion kicking up dust and debris. Ahnaf and I instinctively tensed, ready for anything.



The driver's door swung open, and out stepped Ramsey. His black trench coat fluttered slightly in the night breeze, the polished lenses of his glasses reflecting the flickering lights from the distant fires. He gave us a smug

smile, one that somehow managed to be both reassuring and exasperating at the same time.

"Hey, kids," he said casually, like we'd just bumped into him at a diner instead of in the middle of a disaster zone.

"Ramsey?!" we exclaimed in unison, caught completely off guard.

He chuckled as he leaned against the open car door. "Did you really think the government would let two walking weapons of mass destruction stroll around the city unsupervised? Please. If I'd known you were this naïve, I would've brought popcorn."

Ahnaf folded his arms, his expression a mix of irritation and suspicion. "I thought you left to handle something important."

Ramsey's smirk didn't waver. "I was about to. But Leonis decided my priorities needed realigning. He wanted me to make sure you two got home in one piece." He sighed theatrically. "And now here I am, a glorified chauffeur. Babysitting wasn't exactly in the job description."

I opened the back door and slid in, grinning despite myself. "Guess you're stuck with us."

Ahnaf climbed in after me, his irritation bubbling over. "This is ridiculous."

"Tell me about it," Ramsey muttered as he slid into the driver's seat and started the car. "You two have no idea what ridiculous is until you've negotiated with a mob boss while dodging sniper fire. Trust me, this? This is practically a vacation."

As we drove, the chaos of the city became even more apparent. Roads were blocked by collapsed buildings and overturned vehicles. Ambulances and fire trucks maneuvered carefully through the debris-strewn streets, their sirens cutting through the heavy night air. Ramsey navigated with practiced ease, taking sharp turns and sudden detours without so much as a second of hesitation.

"Ever notice," Ramsey began, his tone conversational as he spun the wheel to avoid a fallen streetlight, "how destruction has a way of laying everything bare? A fight like that—it doesn't just wreck buildings. It shows you who people really are."

Ahnaf glanced at him. "What are you getting at?"

Ramsey smirked again, adjusting his glasses. "Just an observation. Sentinel? Khan? The city? It's all one big mirror, kid. Everyone's staring at the wreckage, pointing fingers, blaming powers or politics or fate. But deep down, they're really scared of what they see in themselves. That includes you two."

I frowned, his words hitting a little too close to home. "And what do you see when you look at us?"

Ramsey didn't answer immediately. He took another sharp turn, the car jostling slightly as we hit a rough patch of road. Finally, he said, "Potential. And a hell of a lot of wasted time if you don't figure out what to do with it."

Ahnaf scowled. "You sure know how to kill the mood, Ramsey."

He snorted. "Mood? Kid, you're living in the aftermath of a goddamn apocalypse, and you're worried about a mood? Prioritize."



The car fell silent again, save for the hum of the engine and the distant wail of sirens. I watched the city pass by through the window, each broken street and shattered building a reminder of what had happened—and what could still happen.

"Ramsey," I said quietly, breaking the silence. "Do you think we're enough? To stop him, I mean?"

He glanced at me in the rearview mirror, his sharp eyes softening just a fraction. "The better question is—do you?"

I was silent.

Ahnaf broke the silence first, leaning back in his seat, arms crossed but tension easing slightly. "Maybe."

Ramsey's gaze flicked to the rearview mirror, his sharp eyes narrowing as if he could dissect that single word. "Then I '*guess*' our '*fate*' is hanging on a '*maybe*' come September 22nd, eh?"

Ahnaf sat up straighter. "You got a better plan?"

Ramsey's lips twitched into his characteristic smirk. "Better plans? I have plans so layered even I can barely keep track. But right now, I'm focused on making sure the city is still standing by then. Because if we don't stop an emerging threat soon, September 22nd won't matter. There won't be a city left to defend."

I leaned forward, alarmed. "What? Something that dangerous?"

Ramsey glanced at me briefly before turning back to the road. "Politics are always dangerous, kid. The more power someone wields, the more lives are caught in their crosshairs."

Ahnaf shifted in his seat, his frustration giving way to determination. "If that's the case, then let us help you."

Ramsey chuckled dryly. "Ah, the enthusiasm of youth. Unfortunately, if brute force solved every problem, none of us would be here right now. Heartlands wouldn't exist. Khan wouldn't exist. And neither would my headaches."

The mention of Heartlands sent a jolt through both Ahnaf and me. We exchanged a glance before speaking in unison. "Heartlands?"

Ramsey gave a slow nod, his tone suddenly more serious. "Yes. I'm sorry for everything Heartlands has done to you, Ahnaf. For what I've caused you, indirectly or otherwise. But this ends soon. I'll see to that."

Ahnaf leaned forward, his brow furrowed. "How are you going to stop them? They're a monster of their own."

Ramsey let out a low chuckle, his tone laced with irony. "Remember those documents I swiped from you lot back at the Leeds Vault? Around New Year's, wasn't it?"

Ahnaf blinked. "The Leeds Vault incident?"

"Exactly," Ramsey confirmed, his voice taking on a sharper edge. "I've been sitting on that intel, waiting for the right moment. It's the kind of thing that doesn't just expose a vulnerability—it creates one. I've been connecting the dots since that night."

I hesitated. "So, you're finally going to use it?"

Ramsey nodded. "It's time. And, Ahnaf... I owe you another apology. For your father. I didn't want to involve you in any of this, but circumstances don't ask for permission."

Ahnaf stared out the window for a moment, his face unreadable. Finally, he turned back. "I don't hold a grudge. I think... I think you did what you had to, for us to get here."

Ramsey raised an eyebrow, his smirk softening into something that could almost be called pride. "Getting wise, are we? Maybe there's hope for you yet."

Ahnaf gave a faint smile, the kind that was more a recognition of the moment than genuine amusement. "Maybe."



The city's ruins gave way to the quieter outskirts as Ramsey skillfully maneuvered us through the last of the detours. The streets here were dark, lined with battered houses and flickering streetlights, but it was a far cry from the destruction in the city center. Finally, we reached my house.

"Here we are," Ramsey announced, his voice snapping me out of my thoughts. I opened the door, stepping out and turning back to the car.

"Thanks for the ride, Ramsey," I said, trying to convey more in my tone than just gratitude.

He simply nodded. "Take care of yourself, Eric. Things are going to get messier before they get cleaner."



Ahnaf watched me as I waved goodbye, then turned to look at his own reflection in the car window. The vehicle sped up after I entered my house, and Ramsey continued the drive.

We reached Ahnaf's house not long after. The car slowed to a stop, and Ramsey turned toward him. His voice was uncharacteristically gentle, though the sharpness remained. "You take care of yourself, okay?"

Ahnaf paused, then nodded. "You too."

Ramsey smirked, glancing forward at the house where a woman was stepping out onto the porch. "I'll do what I can to stop Heartlands once and for all. You don't need to worry about that."

A woman came out of the house in front—Ahnaf's mother, Ruvana—looked relieved as she saw her son. Ahnaf glanced at her, then back at Ramsey.

"Guess I'll see you," Ahnaf said, stepping out of the car.

"Stay sharp," Ramsey called after him as the door closed. For a moment, he lingered, watching as Ahnaf walked toward his mother, who pulled him into a tight embrace. Ramsey's expression was unreadable, but it wasn't hard to imagine the wheels turning in his mind, already plotting his next move.

Then, without another word, he drove off into the night.

Ahnaf stepped inside his home, closing the door behind him with a soft click. His mother, Ruvana, stood in the hallway, her arms crossed but her expression unreadable. She gave a small nod toward the bathroom.

"Go freshen up," she said simply. Her voice carried the weight of someone who had been waiting long enough to know when not to ask questions—at least for now.



He nodded back, heading toward the bathroom. The familiar sound of the door shutting behind him felt strangely final. The mirror reflected a face he barely recognized—dust streaked across his skin, exhaustion carved into every line. He didn't linger on it.

Turning on the shower, he let the water run hot before stepping in, the steam rising and clouding the small space around him. The first blast of warmth hit his face, easing the tightness in his muscles, but not the heaviness in his chest. His hands rested against the tiled wall, the water cascading down his back.

Hell of a day, he thought, the words forming bitterly in his mind.

Khan's face loomed in his memory—his arrival at the hospital, the effortless destruction.

Khan showing up for me. Killing half of Davis's men like they were nothing.

He tilted his head back, letting the water pour over him. His knuckles whitened as his hands clenched against the wall.

Eric and James... losing. Eric's speed couldn't even phase him. James's magic, his strength... all useless.

The image of Eric being thrown aside like a rag doll flashed in his mind, followed by James, battered and beaten. His jaw tightened as the next thought crept in, unbidden.

And me? What did I do? What could I do? My strength... worthless against him.

He looked down at his hands, water streaming off them. His breathing hitched slightly, his grip tightening on the tile edge.

Even Sentinel.

The name came like a curse in his mind. He could see it so clearly—Sentinel standing before Khan, the aura of invincibility shattered.

Even he wasn't strong enough. I saw it in his eyes. Fear.

The water around him wasn't soothing anymore—it felt heavy, suffocating. He leaned his forehead against the wall, closing his eyes as his thoughts shifted.

And now the city... gone to shits in a day. A single day.

He pushed himself upright, wiping his face with both hands, but the thoughts wouldn't stop.

Then came the words. The ones he couldn't get out of his head.

"Ask yourself, Ahnaf," Khan had said, his voice a low, mocking growl. "If your father was with The Heartlands since 1998, how were you even born?"

He froze, the water still beating down on him. His fingers curled into fists at his sides, trembling slightly.

How is that possible? The question echoed in his mind, louder with each passing second. He looked down at the water pooling around the drain, as though it might hold some kind of answer.

Mom's been lying to me... hasn't she?

The realization twisted in his stomach, sharp and cold even under the hot water. *Is she still lying to me?*

He turned off the shower abruptly, standing there for a moment, dripping and motionless. The sound of water draining filled the silence as he stared at nothing, the weight of everything pressing down on him.

When he finally stepped out, his reflection in the fogged mirror was a blur, just like his thoughts. But one thing was clear—he wasn't walking out of this house without answers.

Ahnaf stepped out of the shower, the steam swirling around him like a fading storm. His damp hair clung to his forehead as he grabbed a towel and dried himself off, the chill of the night air sneaking through the bathroom window. His mind was quieter now, the torrent of thoughts replaced with a dull ache in his chest.

Pulling on a fresh T-shirt and a pair of sweatpants, he caught his reflection in the mirror. His face looked older, more worn than it should have at nineteen. He rubbed a hand over his jaw, exhaling deeply before turning away and heading out of the bathroom.

The faint aroma of spices hit him as he walked down the hall, his stomach growling in response. He hadn't eaten all day, and the smell of kebabs and grilled steak was like a beacon calling him to the dining table.

When he entered the dining room, the sight before him brought an unbidden smile to his face. His favorite dishes were laid out neatly on the table, the warm lighting making everything look even more inviting. His mom, Ruvana, stood nearby, her hands on her hips and a cheerful grin lighting up her face.



Ahnaf sat down at the table, a wide grin spreading across his face as the familiar aroma of his favorite kebabs and steaks filled the air. The plate in front of him looked like a feast, and for the first time that day, he felt a spark of joy.

Ruvana beamed at him, placing a steaming bowl of rice next to his plate. "Well, dig in, haha! You must really be starving after all your antics out there."

He chuckled, shaking his head. "Oh, Mom... you didn't have to do all this. Seriously, how did you even find the time?"

She waved him off, a playful glint in her eye. "Don't you underestimate me, young man. I'm a superhero's mom, remember? That comes with its own set of powers."

Ahnaf couldn't help but laugh at that as he grabbed a kebab, taking a massive bite. The smoky flavor hit him immediately, and he let out a satisfied groan. "Mmm! This is so good!"

"Careful now, manners, young man," Ruvana teased, wagging her finger at him.

"Sorry!" he mumbled through a mouthful, though his grin betrayed just how much he was enjoying himself. "But seriously, this is amazing, Mom. I didn't realize how hungry I was."

"Midnight will do that to you," she said, sitting across from him with a cup of tea. Her eyes softened as she watched him devour the food. "You've had a long day. I could tell when you walked in."

He paused for a moment, chewing thoughtfully, before meeting her gaze. "Yeah... it was a rough one."

Ruvana reached over, giving his hand a light squeeze. "Well, no matter what happened out there, you're here now. And you're safe. That's what matters to me."

Her words were simple, but they carried a warmth that made Ahnaf's chest tighten. He swallowed hard, his hunger momentarily forgotten. "Thanks, Mom. I mean it."

She smiled, her eyes twinkling. "Now, don't go getting all sentimental on me. Finish your food before it gets cold."

Ahnaf laughed, the tension easing out of his shoulders. He picked up a piece of steak, savoring each bite. As he ate, Ruvana began recounting her day, sharing small, cheerful anecdotes about her conversations with the neighbors and how she managed to snag fresh ingredients despite the chaos in the city.

"You wouldn't believe the look on Mrs. Patel's face when I told her I'd managed to get steak today," she said with a laugh. "She swore I must have some secret government hookup."

"Well, do you?" Ahnaf teased, his mouth full again.

"Of course not!" Ruvana feigned offense, then leaned in conspiratorially. "But if I did, you'd be the last person I'd tell. You'd eat me out of house and home."

Ahnaf nearly choked on his food from laughing so hard. "You're terrible!"

"And you love me for it," she shot back, taking a sip of her tea.

As the meal went on, Ahnaf felt himself relaxing more and more. The weight of the day's events hadn't disappeared, but for this brief moment, they didn't feel so overwhelming. Here, with his mom's laughter filling the room and the taste of home-cooked food on his tongue, the world didn't seem so bleak.



When he finally leaned back in his chair, his plate completely empty, he let out a contented sigh. "I needed that. Thanks, Mom."

Ruvana smiled warmly as she reached over to tousle his hair, something she hadn't done in years. "Anything for my baby boy."

AhnaF chuckled softly, leaning into the chair. "So, uh... you've gotten used to all this? Me going out there, facing guys like Khan?"

Her expression shifted slightly, the corners of her mouth tightening. "That is something I will never get used to. Truth be told, I will always worry... worry about what might happen to you." She hesitated for a moment, her voice dropping. "You saw what happened to James, right?"

AhnaF nodded slowly, his earlier cheer dimming. "I know."

"And I also know," she continued, her tone resolute, "that you'd do the same in a heartbeat if it meant saving someone."

AhnaF nodded "Yes and I am sorr-"

"Don't be," she said, placing her hand over his. "I am proud of you, AhnaF. That's how I raised my son. Selfless, just like your dad..." She paused, her eyes glistening briefly. "Just be careful for me, okay? You have a home to come back to, and your mom will always be waiting for you."

AhnaF looked at her, his throat tightening. He sat up straighter, his voice quiet but firm. "I know, Mom. And I will always come back to you. No matter what happens. I promise."

Her smile returned, softer this time. "Thank you, AhnaF. That's all I ask."

The room felt lighter for a moment, the weight of the day momentarily lifted. But AhnaF's expression grew serious as he pushed his plate aside and looked at his mother with intent.

"Mom," he began, his voice steady but low, "I want to ask you something."

Ruvana tilted her head slightly, her brows furrowing in curiosity. "Yes?"

"You don't have to protect me from the truth anymore."

Her cheerful expression wavered, a flicker of something unreadable crossing her face. "What are you talking about?"

"Who am I, Mom?" AhnaF asked, his tone sharper now. "What am I?"

She blinked, visibly taken aback. "What kind of question is that? You're my boy, of course."

"That's a lie," Ahnaf said, leaning forward, his gaze locked on hers. "Who actually am I?"

"Don't speak nonsense," she replied, her voice firm but slightly shaky.

"Nonsense? What even makes sense anymore?" he said, his voice rising slightly before he reined it in. "I'm not a kid, Mom. How was I born? How was I born if Dad was with the Heartlands before I was even supposed to exist?"

Ruvana's eyes widened, her composure faltering for the first time. "Huh? That's... an odd topic. Of course, he came back from time to time."

Ahnaf shook his head, his tone unrelenting. "I remember what Dad told us. He said back then he couldn't meet up with you for years. Years, Mom."

Her lips parted as if to speak, but no words came out.

"And conveniently," Ahnaf pressed, his voice thick with emotion, "the day I was born—September 22nd—an unidentified object was reported landing in a remote farmland area nearby. Tell me, Mom. How are these things not connected?"



The air in the room grew heavy, the warmth of moments ago replaced with an unspoken tension. Ruvana looked at her son, her eyes searching his face for something—an explanation, an answer.

Ruvana's hand trembled as she placed it on the edge of the table, steadying herself. Her voice, usually so confident, softened into something fragile.

"Well..."

Ahnaf leaned closer, his eyes searching hers desperately. "Please, Mom. I only want to know the truth about me. Who am I? What am I?"

She held his gaze for a long moment, her lips pressing into a thin line before she spoke. "You will always be my boy, Ahnaf."

"Yes," he said, his voice firm but warm, "and nothing will ever change that. I love you, Mom. Always have, always will."

Ruvana's lips quivered, and she looked away, blinking rapidly. Then, finally, she whispered, "I... I'm not your mom."

The words hit like a thunderclap.

Ahnaf froze. "Huh?"

"I'm not..." Her voice cracked, and she took a deep breath before continuing, her eyes misty but resolute. "I'm not your mother, Ahnaf."



The room seemed to shrink, the walls closing in as Ahnaf sat back, his heart thudding in his chest. "What... what do you mean?"

Her gaze drifted to the table, her fingers gripping its edge as though anchoring herself to reality. "It was September 22nd, nineteen years ago. Late afternoon. I was driving back from running errands when I saw it. A flash in the sky, bright and searing, like a comet burning through the atmosphere. But there was no comet—just a burning trail with... nothing behind it. I

thought it was an aircraft at first, something breaking apart mid-air, but it wasn't falling right. It was... deliberate, like it was being guided."

Ahnaf listened, his breath shallow as her words painted an image in his mind.

"It came lower and lower, so fast I thought it would crash right into me. I panicked and swerved off the road, but it soared over me and slammed into a nearby field with a sound like the earth splitting open." Her voice trembled as she recounted the memory. "I don't know why, but I couldn't just drive away. Something pulled at me. Curiosity? Fear? I don't know. I left the car and ran toward the smoke, toward the field."

Ahnaf swallowed hard. "And then?"

"There was a crater," she said, her voice dropping to a near whisper. "Massive, like something had punched through the earth itself. Smoke and heat poured from it, but in the center... there was something strange. A flickering, almost like a mirage but solid—some kind of circular object. It would come into view, then vanish, like it didn't belong here. But then, it stopped flickering. And I saw it clearly for the first time."



"What was it?" Ahnaf's voice was barely audible.

"A sphere," she said, her eyes distant as if seeing it all over again. "Metallic and smooth, but nothing like I'd ever seen before. It shimmered faintly, almost... alive. As I got closer, it opened—like it was waiting for me."

Ahnaf leaned forward, his pulse quickening. "And inside?"

"A baby." Her voice cracked again, and she looked directly at him. "A newborn. Lying there, sleeping peacefully, wrapped in a strange cloth I didn't recognize. It was... the most beautiful and terrifying thing I'd ever seen. And somehow, despite everything—despite the heat, the smoke—it looked untouched. Perfect."

Ahnaf's throat tightened. He didn't speak, couldn't speak.

"I don't know what came over me," Ruvana continued, her voice thick with emotion. "Maybe it was instinct. Maybe it was something else. But in that moment, all I could think about was protecting that child. Because I knew... I *knew*... that if the authorities, the government, or even the police found out about it, they wouldn't see a child. They'd see something to experiment on, something to exploit."

Her hands gripped the table harder, her knuckles white. "So I ran. I grabbed the child, wrapped it in my arms, and ran back to my car. I drove away, heart pounding, knowing I'd just done something that would change my life forever. And I didn't care. All I could think about was keeping the child safe."

Tears welled in her eyes as she looked at him. "From that day on, I raised that small boy as my own. I taught him to be kind, to be selfless, to be better than anyone else around him. I loved him. I still do. he is my son, no matter where he came from. No matter what he is."

Ahnaf sat there, motionless, his mind spinning with the revelation. "So... that baby. That was?"

"Yes," she whispered. "That was **YOU**."



He leaned back in his chair, staring at the ceiling, his thoughts racing. "And And you never told anyone? Not even Dad?"

She shook her head. "Your father never knew. By the time he returned to my life, I'd already made my choice. You were my son, Ahnaf. And that was the only truth I cared about."

Ahnaf's voice was barely a whisper. "And now?"

She leaned forward, her hand covering his. "Now, I still see you as my son. And nothing—nothing—will ever change that."

Ahnaf reached forward, pulling Ruvana into a tight hug. Tears streamed silently down his face, and he could feel her trembling in his arms.

"I love you, Mom," he whispered, his voice thick with emotion. "You're the only mom I have... and the only one I'll ever want."

Ruvana's arms tightened around him as her tears fell freely. "Oh, Ahnaf... my boy."



They stayed like that for a moment, their shared grief and love filling the room. When they finally pulled away, her eyes were red, but a soft, proud smile lingered on her lips.

"Now you see why I hid it from you," she said gently.

Ahnaf nodded, his chest rising and falling as he steadied his breath. "I understand... but it raises more questions than answers."

Ruvana tilted her head slightly, concern knitting her brow. "What do you mean?"

"Did you ever tell anyone?" Ahnaf asked, his tone cautious. "Ramsey? Leonis?"

She shook her head firmly. "No one. Maybe they suspect something, or maybe they don't. Either way, it doesn't matter. They can't change anything whether they know or not."

Ahnaaf sat back, his fingers gripping the edge of the table. His voice dropped lower, almost hesitant. "You know what Khan told me?"

Ruvana's body stiffened at the name, her face clouding with unease. "What?"

Ahnaaf took a slow breath, his gaze distant, reliving the confrontation in his mind. "He said, *'This world is small. Too small... for both of us.'*"

Ruvana frowned, the weight of those words settling between them. "What does that mean?"

Ahnaaf hesitated, his words tumbling out cautiously, as though saying them aloud would make them real. "He told me about his planet. How it once prospered, with technology so advanced it would seem like magic to us. But something happened—something catastrophic. And in the chaos... he sent his only family, his own son, through a pod to survive."

Ruvana's eyes widened, her lips parting in shock.

"He said he's been looking for that pod ever since," Ahnaaf continued, his voice trembling. "When I asked him how that was even possible, he said, *'The pod was a time pod. The state would remain the same regardless of the time passed, as long as someone was inside.'*"

The silence that followed was suffocating. Ruvana's hand flew to her mouth, her mind racing as she pieced the implications together. "Ahnaaf... you don't mean to say—"

He nodded slowly, his jaw tightening as the realization settled in his chest like a heavy stone. "It explains so much... why I've always been different. Why I've always been able to adapt to things no one else can. Just like... just like *him*."

Ruvana stared at him, her face pale, her lips trembling. "If that's true... if what he says is true..."

Ahnaaf's voice dropped to a whisper, each word slow and deliberate, the weight of them pressing into the air.

"Then he... would be... my... *father*."

